

15 things AA can teach the church

Alcoholics Anonymous has forever changed the church. And it has done it right under our noses. Or better put, in our church basements, classrooms and meeting rooms. AA introduced the concept of spirituality apart from religion. It took away the middleman. It has put into place the most successful self-duplicating, small group model in recent history. And it has done this by emulating the model of the early church. On June 10, AA turned 80 years old. From extremely humble beginnings, an estimated 23 million people in the US now live with long-term recovery from alcohol and drug addiction. Here are the top 15 things AA can teach the church:

1. **Stick to your primary purpose.** AA doesn't try to be all things to all people. Its primary purpose is to help other alcoholics achieve sobriety. That's what it does, and it does it very well. If someone wants to apply the 12 steps to overeating, smoking or hoarding, a new fellowship is formed. This laser-like focus allows for great success. What if the church kept the main thing the main thing? Such as making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?
2. **You can't keep it unless you give it away.** AA members know that in order to maintain their sobriety, they have to work with others and share the message of recovery. That's how Bill W. and Dr. Bob got sober. And it hasn't changed since then. Evangelism is built right into the 12 steps.
3. **Get a sponsor.** Sponsorship is the key to success. Every AA member who hopes to remain sober gets a sponsor to help them work the 12 steps. Then they turn around and sponsor someone else. What if churches focused on creating sponsors or disciples who disciple the next person?
4. **Insist on experiencing God.** God is very loosely defined, if at all in AA. Each person works on their own concept of God, and it changes and grows as they change and grow. The church has made much of trying to define God instead of helping people experience God.
5. **Promise a spiritual awakening.** It's the results of working the 12 steps. The church is short on this promise and long on trying to get people to join.
6. **Focus on spirituality.** Deepened spirituality is the marker of growth among AA members and groups. Is that what drives your church growth?
7. **You don't need a building.** AA has an estimated 2 million members worldwide in 115,000 groups. Most of them meet in someone else's space, paying rent instead of mortgage and repairs. That frees up a lot of time and energy to stick to their primary purpose.
8. **Don't sponge.** AA has a tradition of being self-supporting through its own contributions. Is your church looking for someone else to foot the bill?
9. **There are no stars.** Anonymity, not celebrity, is the key to the success of this program. Humility is also a characteristic of Christ. How about your church?
10. **Don't shoot your wounded.** Relapsers are welcomed back with open arms. Judgment, or the perception of judgment, is often felt in churches.
11. **Have fun.** Lots of laughter emanates from AA rooms as people laugh at their former follies. "We absolutely insist on enjoying life" is an oft-quoted line from the "Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous." Laughter keeps people coming back.
12. **Let the hierarchy serve the local group, and not the other way around.** The General Service Office of AA exists only to serve the local groups. Denominational offices sometimes give the opposite impression.
13. **Share your story.** Early Christians had stories of salvation and they shared them. This also helped them stay strong in the faith and hold one another accountable. AA is all about sharing stories.
14. **Focus on the newcomer.** The newcomer is the most important person in the rooms of AA. They are actively welcomed, told to keep coming back, and encouraged to get a sponsor. Their transformation begins immediately. Churches too often stay focused on the longtimers, and are reluctant to make space for newcomers.
15. **Expect resurrection!** People come back from the dead all the time in AA rooms. It's what AA specializes in. New life is expected and demanded. How about in your church?